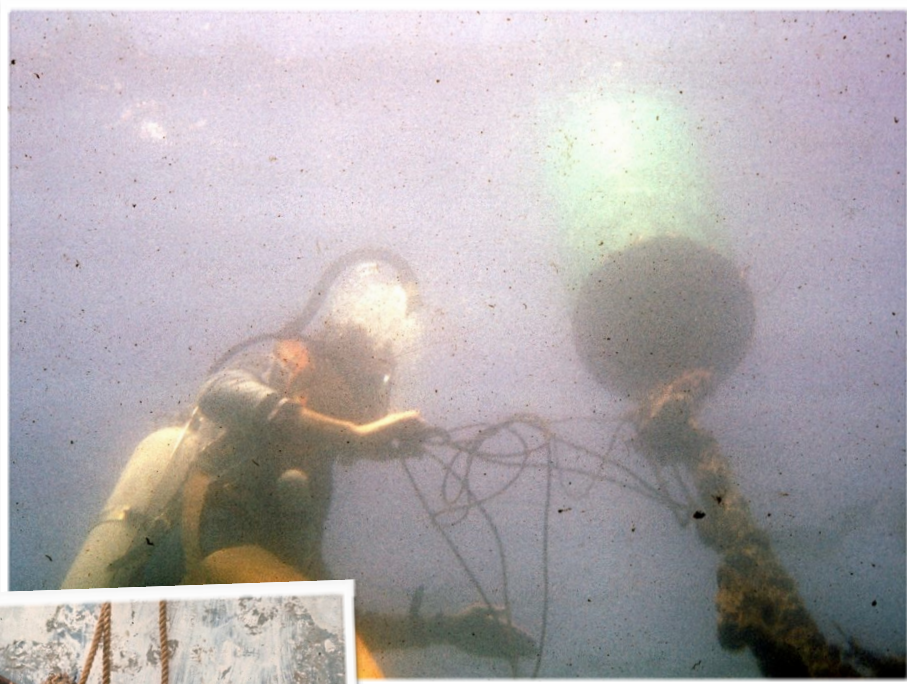


# The Chini Club Shipwreck



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During the late 70s a team of divers operating from a lighter moored just offshore from the Chini Club worked for a few months on this project. Whilst some artefacts were discovered British Television News reported the expedition & the San Antonio as a boring wreck. Maybe there was too much hype & the results were a bit disappointing ..... who knows ? I recall three guys, David & John Chetham & their friend Peter Bradshaw who succeeded raising some old anchors from the sea bed. These are now displayed in Fort Jesus museum. Below is an account of the sinking of the San Antonio & a magazine article that was published at the time.

Just before the Portuguese surrendered to the Arabs in 1697, there was an intense battle for control of Fort Jesus.

In the process, a Portuguese warship that had been deployed near the fort was sunk. Christened Santo Antonio, the ship still lies on the sea bed near the fort, piling on rust by the kilo.

But Santo Antonio's fate could soon change because the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is planning to salvage it and turn it into a tourist attraction.

Industry players say there is a fortune lying deep in the waters that surround Mombasa, one of the most important trade and military destinations of the 17th century.

Because of its role as a convergence point for Portuguese, Arab, and British explorers, the port town witnessed some of the bloodiest conflicts during that era, and NMK believes that there are tens of ships wrecked around the island.

Underwater archaeologists say that, if well preserved, these shipwrecks and the artefacts they are believed to hold could help revive cultural tourism at the Coast, a sector whose fortunes have dwindled over the past few years.

For instance, statistics indicate that the number of foreign and local visitors to Fort Jesus, the main cultural site at the Coast, has remained at around 170,000 a year in the past five years – apart from 2008, when it declined to 130,000 due to the political turmoil that rocked the country that year.

And, with the current decline in cruise tourism due to pirate activity in the Indian Ocean, a substitute product is necessary to supplement the shortfall in earnings.

Kenya's tourism earnings have been on the rise over the past three years, with the industry earning the exchequer Sh73.4 billion in 2010, up from Sh62 billion the previous year, while projections for last year, whose figures have yet to be released, are in the range of Sh80 billion.

However, the industry is banking on diversification into high-end products – besides the traditional safaris and beach tourism – if this growth is to be sustained.

Two weeks ago, Mr Caesar Bitu, the National Museums' head of underwater archaeology, accompanied by his colleague Phillip Wanyama (the two are the only underwater archaeologists in the country), spent several hours examining Santo Antonio before going to Ngomeni in the South Coast for yet another exploration.

"One of the ways to preserve these artefacts and turn them into tourist attractions is by securing the wreck and fitting it with underwater cameras that transmit images to visitors above sea level. Given today's technology, this is possible, although a bit expensive," says Mr Bitu.

There are many other ships that sank off Mombasa, including Highland Lassie (1879), Sussex (1909), and Hamad (1909). Of the 32 known shipwrecks along the Kenyan coastline, 11 have lain in the deep waters for more than 50 years. The rest have been there for a shorter period.

In Africa, heritage tourism has not been fully exploited to attract high value tourists who make an average of three visits annually, according to the World Tourism Organisation (WTO).

But now heritage professionals in Kenya and Egypt are working towards realising the objective of generating revenue by providing underwater cultural tours where visitors can enjoy the flora and fauna of the deep seas.





# The Mombasa wreck expedition

This is a preliminary report on an underwater archaeological operation in progress in the Old Harbour of Mombasa, Kenya—the excavation and exploration of the wreck of a Portuguese warship which sank there in the autumn of 1697. It is being conducted under the auspices of the American Institute of Nautical Archaeology, and its field director is Robin Piercey, who was one of the team involved in raising the famous Greek ship found in Kyrenia harbour, Cyprus; he has been assisted by Hamo Sassoon, former curator of Fort Jesus museum. Among the divers working under their direction have been teams from the British Services, the Kenyan navy and a Portuguese diving team under Comandante Antonio Cardoso.

At the conclusion of the first three-month excavation season it had been possible to clear the starboard side of the ship aft of the mainmast; and from a study of a contemporary Portuguese manuscript it seems likely that the vessel was a 42-gun frigate called the *San Antonio de Tanna*.

During the 1978 season, which started in early January and which will continue until the end of March, the team plan to make a detailed study of all the timbers in the stern half of the ship, recording its dimensions and curvature to enable a scale model of the lower part of the frigate to be made. They intend to uncover the forward half of the ship and to raise finds from within the hull. A third season will be required to survey the forward half and to excavate down-slope from the wreck to recover objects which have fallen from the upper parts of the vessel. But there are no plans for raising and preserving the remains of the ship; although not impossible this would be costly and it is doubtful whether the surviving timbers could be preserved.

Among the more interesting objects recovered from the wreck were: a bronze cannon, dated 1678, with its breech block; a glass case bottle with a pewter screw top, probably used to hold wine or spirits; two large and beautiful Portuguese glazed jars with bird and flower decoration in blue and brown on a grey background; a wooden figure of an angel or cherub carrying a trumpet, and fragments of other carved figures; and an interesting small four-handled pot. This last, when cleaned out, was found to contain a large quantity of finely ground carbon ink; and it is assumed that the handles were for suspending the pot—a logical way of carrying ink on board ship.

The operations on site are carried out from a lighter lent by the Harbours Corporation and fitted out as a diving base equipped with a small portable office, where the details of every dive are immediately recorded. Everything recovered from the wreck is taken to Fort Jesus which overlooks the site of



Some of the objects recovered from the wreck. The cannon, dated 1678, was found in 1970, its breech block in 1977.



Left, a carved wooden figure of a cherub or angel raised from the stern of the ship after 280 years' submersion. Right, a diver measuring the mainmast step in the keelson; his fins are resting on the collapsed side of the pump box.

the wreck; and inside the fort the old prison kitchens have been converted into a conservation laboratory. Here the finds are sorted according to the material from which they are made and stored in water in separate bins. A fungicide is added to any wood or rope recovered to control fungal growth until the specimen can be stabilized in polyethylene glycol. Metals are cleaned electrolytically; glass and ceramics are cleaned mechanically, and potsherds are sorted and reassembled.

One of the problems of the operation is underwater photography. In the water of Mombasa Old Harbour the periods of good visibility are short and rare. To quote an interim report: "Spring tides usually bring short periods of clarity just at the turn of the tide; it evidently requires a good

volume of water to push the harbour's dirty water back up the creek and soon after the tide has turned all the muck comes floating back down the creek on its way to the sea. But even during the clear periods the water is not clear enough, and if you hold your camera far enough away from the wreck to get a reasonable view of the timbers the water cuts down visibility and so-called black and white film turns out as a symphony in greys. The remedy for this state of affairs (produced by Jeremy Green, curator of maritime archaeology in Western Australia) is a super wide-angled lens (15mm). With this it is possible to photograph a 2 metre square of the wreck from a distance of 1.5 metres. There is inevitably some distortion at the edges with such an abnormal lens, but the results

are very acceptable . . ."

Last summer an exhibition of the finds to date was staged in Fort Jesus and opened by the Provisional Commissioner. Among the later ones, not previously mentioned, were the remains of four ship's navigation compasses. Two of these consisted of round wooden compass bowls balanced with a simple copper gimbal arrangement in a square wooden box. One of the bowls was painted white inside and the other black. Comandante Cardoso has suggested that the black one would have been used for night navigation. The compass cards, needles and protective glass covers have not been found and it may be that the Portuguese destroyed the compasses to prevent the Arabs capturing and using them ●



'Many thanks for the piece. I read through it. Yes, the museum is being rather ambitious trying to put cameras down on the wreck.

Johnny, myself and Peter Bradshaw were doing an evening dive on the Santo Anonio at high water slack and just as we were about to surface, Johnny spotted the anchor in question (only one). He was pretty excited having recognised it after his dives off Cyprus. We arranged for a lifting bell - I think from Conway Plough.

We let James Kirkman know and when we raised it he sent a pick-up round to collect it. On land it took 8 people to lift it onto the back of the pick-up.

I attach 2 pictures - one in dreadful condition showing the lift and one when it was out of the water before the crud was removed.'

David Chetham





